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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [NATO](#) [AF](#) [NL](#)
SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/AFGHANISTAN: NORWEGIAN "NO"
COMPLICATES EXTENSION PLANS

Classified By: Ambassador Roland Arnall, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The GONL was disappointed -- but not surprised -- by the Norwegian Government's decision not to deploy to Uruzgan province as part of an extended Dutch mission. A French-Norwegian combination was viewed by many Dutch interlocutors as the only way to ensure quick Dutch Cabinet and parliamentary approval. Now, the GONL will attempt to make the case that contributions from Slovakia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and -- most importantly -- France will be enough to warrant an extension. While many GONL officials expect a fierce debate with parliament, they are confident the Dutch will extend in some capacity. The key question will be for how long: PM Balkenende's Christian Democrats and Defense Minister van Middelkoop's Christian Union favor an open-extended extension. However, the third coalition member -- the Labor Party (PvdA) -- will argue the Dutch did not receive the support they requested, while reconstruction progress continues to lag and many of the additional contributions will require substantial Dutch training and financial support. Labor will likely push for a fixed extension with an exit strategy; the Labor parliamentary faction has already announced publicly it will only support an 18-month extension with a "drop-dead" departure date. As a result, the November 9 Cabinet meeting is expected to be contentious as Christian Democrat and Labor ministers go head-to-head over the baseline time period for an extension. Linkages to other domestic political issues -- such as negotiations over a new dismissal law -- may give PM Balkenende leverage over Labor to ask for a longer extension, but that remains to be seen. The decision timeline continues to slide as a result -- the GONL hopes to make an extension decision public by the end of November, followed by a debate in parliament before the winter recess begins on December 20. However, GONL officials acknowledge the debate could slip to the new year -- allowing both proponents and critics the opportunity to prepare for the debate. Dutch officials point to President Karzai's visit to The Hague in December as an opportunity to influence those sitting on the fence. End summary.

Defense Minister Remains Confident

¶2. (C) Van Middelkoop told Amb. Arnall on November 6 that he was still confident of a Dutch mission extension in Uruzgan

despite the recent news from Oslo that the Norwegians will not join the Dutch in the south. He said the Dutch Cabinet is almost ready to make an extension decision public, but subsequently expected a fierce debate with the Dutch Parliament. Van Middelkoop described the NATO informal defense ministerial as having gone "very well," especially with the French decision to deploy an Operational and Mentoring Liaison Team (OMLT) to Uruzgan. He said the French contribution will give any Dutch extension "political weight," but added that France and Norway together would have presented an even stronger case to parliament regarding an extension.

13. (C) Van Middelkoop expected a Dutch Cabinet decision by the end of November, with the hope that parliament could conclude its debate prior to Christmas. He said the extension decision could be wrapped up prior to the end of the year, but also acknowledged that the parliamentary debate could slip to January 2008. In addition to the political commitments by several Allies to assist in Uruzgan, van Middelkoop planned to make the argument to parliament that the situation in Uruzgan is changing for the better. He noted that Operation Spin Ghar has gone very well, primarily due to the arrival of several hundred Afghan National Army (ANA) troops. He reminded that the Dutch had been promised 1,200 ANA troops in Uruzgan when they initially deployed. Van Middelkoop hoped to build the case that in addition to the contributions from Allies, a Dutch extension will benefit from the "final" arrival of ANA troops, as well as a new governor and police chief.

14. (C) On the Georgian offer, van Middelkoop acknowledged the Dutch were taking a "cautious approach" in the effort to determine whether Georgian troops possess the level of

professionalism necessary to participate in a NATO mission. Amb. Arnall noted the strong performance by Georgian troops in Iraq, and asked if there were any political concerns regarding a Georgian contribution. Van Middelkoop said FM Verhagen has strong reservations due to Tbilisi's NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) aspirations; if the Dutch accepted the Georgian offer, pressure would mount on the GONL to accept MAP for Georgia at the NATO summit in Bucharest. Van Middelkoop espoused a more pragmatic approach -- if the Georgians are found to be professional and a role could be found for them in a Dutch extension mission, then he would be willing to take their contribution up with Verhagen. Whatever the results of the Dutch review of Georgian capabilities, van Middelkoop said he doubted the Georgian offer would inspire confidence in the Dutch parliament. (Note: It is not clear how subsequent events in Georgia, including the setting of new elections, may affect the status of the Georgian offer and/or Dutch willingness to accept it. End note.)

MOD Working Level Expects Tough Fight

15. (C) In a separate conversation, MOD Senior Advisor for Afghanistan Matthijs Veenendaal told OSD Netherlands Desk Officer LTC Nate Lucas and polmiloff November 7 that the Norwegian "no" had been a "big disappointment" -- but not entirely unexpected, given the internal domestic situation in Oslo. While not dismissing the offers from other Allies, Veenendaal boiled potential assistance down to one French OMLT -- "politically important, but will it be enough to convince parliament?" he questioned.

16. (C) Within the government, Veenendaal noted that the Christian Democrats and the Christian Union favor an open-ended mandate for any extension. The third coalition member -- the Labor Party (PvdA) -- is "not too keen" on an extension, and wants to see significant progress on reconstruction. As such, Veenendaal speculated the Labor Party will try to limit the extension to one-year or less based on the argument that the Dutch did not receive the support for which it had asked, while reconstruction progress has been limited. Veenendaal acknowledged that several

domestic issues, such as negotiations over a new dismissal law, should be taken into consideration with the extension question. For example, if the Labor Party gets what it wants on the dismissal law, PM Balkenende might have further leverage to demand more from Labor in terms of a longer extension in Uruzgan. Veenendaal said these issues will play out over the next month.

¶17. (C) Veenendaal said the GONL expects no further contributions after approaching 18 different nations -- "what we see is what we will get." He acknowledged that the Czech offer came only as a result of U.S. pressure -- the GONL greatly appreciates USG assistance in that regard. Veenendaal said the USG could further assist the Dutch by agreeing to maintain the helicopter bridge in RC-South, but understood our helicopters will be transferred under OEF and be available to ISAF when needed.

¶18. (C) Regarding an eventual successor to the Dutch, Veenendaal suggested Australia might be most appropriate, given their experience in Uruzgan and the lack of willingness among NATO Allies. He said the Dutch expect the Australian opposition party to win upcoming elections, and follow through with the promise to withdraw Australian troops from Iraq for deployment in Afghanistan. Veenendaal said Canberra remains reluctant to take over lead nation status in Uruzgan, despite Dutch encouragement -- USG pressure will be required to persuade the Australians to step up to lead status.

¶19. (C) Veenendaal was not sure how Georgian troops could be used, but added that the Dutch will "remain pragmatic" regarding Tbilisi's offer. He acknowledged that the Australians have complained that bringing in these contributors will complicate command and control issues. He suggested such additional forces may be limited in what they can do, while more complex missions will continue to be done by the Dutch and Australians.

¶110. (C) Veenendaal also pointed to the recent arrival of 600 ANA troops, and the expected arrival of an additional 100 ANA troops, as signs of progress. He noted that the Dutch had signed up for Uruzgan duty with the understanding that 1,200 ANA troops would be present in the province. The Dutch are still hoping for the promised 1,200 ANA troops, but noted that 600-800 ANA soldiers was a vast improvement over the less than 300 ANA troops the Dutch have been working with thus far in Uruzgan.

¶111. (C) Veenendaal also expected a Cabinet decision by the end of November, followed by parliamentary debate. He said the debate could slip until January, and that the GONL is already thinking of potential visitors -- such as President Karzai, Gen. van Loon, and British officials -- to help frame the debate. He appreciated any assistance the USG could provide in helping set up potential visitors. Veenendaal also expected the Dutch performance in Chora and subsequent civilian casualties to resurface. He said at least one journalist from the Dutch newspaper Volkskrant has questioned COMISAF and Gen. Pace on Chora, and that the GONL expects a corresponding article when it could "potentially do the most damage" to any extension possibility, i.e., most likely immediately prior to the parliamentary debate.

MFA: Confident But Concerned

¶12. (C) Dutch MFA Political Director Pieter de Gooijer told Amb. Arnall November 7 that prior to the Norwegian announcement regarding its Afghanistan contributions for 2008, he had been "confident" Dutch CHOD Gen. Berlijn could prepare a "good task force" in Afghanistan with a contribution from Oslo. The Norwegians would have made an easier case militarily and politically, given Norway's capabilities and previous joint British-Dutch-Norwegian naval exercises. However, following Norway's decision against teaming with the Dutch in Uruzgan, Defense Minister van Middelkoop and Gen. Berlijn must now make the case to cabinet

emphasizing the 50 French troops and political solidarity within NATO.

¶13. (C) Although he remains "on balance confident," de Gooijer emphasized the challenges to reaching a positive decision. The number of additional Allied troops in Uruzgan will be about 400 instead of the 500 for which they had hoped. The contributions from France, Georgia, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic will not be replacements for the Dutch, so the "notion of a reduction (in the Dutch deployment) is evaporating." Moreover, with the exception of the French, all other contributors are requesting training and equipment from the Dutch -- it appears unlikely Dutch costs will drop significantly. De Gooijer said Canberra was concerned over so many new partners, and quoted Australian FM Downer as saying: "It is good news that we are asking for other contributions, but the Slovaks?" Finally, the Dutch understand the USG believes Georgian troops are "up to standard," but remain cautious and want to verify Georgian readiness during Dutch-Georgian consultations this week.

¶14. (C) De Gooijer repeated several times that the Dutch are "very appreciative" of U.S. and Allied efforts to find support, and that the Dutch "value" the proposed Allied contributions. At the same time, it will take "mental agility" to make the case for an extension. Domestically, the Labor Party wants to limit the Dutch deployment with a fixed deadline prior to the elections in 2011. The Christian Democrats (CDA) would prefer to base the Dutch deployment decision on NATO's needs. The cabinet's formal decision, in the form of the Article 100 letter to parliament, will use careful language to bridge these two views.

¶15. (C) Regarding a timeline for a Dutch extension decision, de Gooijer noted that the "hexagon" (PM Balkenende, Defense Minister van Middelkoop, FM Verhagen, Deputy Prime Ministers Bos and Rouvoet, and Development Minister Koenders) will review the matter on November 9. The full cabinet could make an informal decision either November 16 or 23, followed by an Article 100 letter to parliament on November 23 or 30. An

earlier notification to parliament would strengthen chances that parliament could take a decision by the end of the year.

If the notification slips until November 30, however, then parliament will probably wait until after the holidays to make a decision. De Gooijer commented that a delayed decision is not necessarily a bad thing, especially as President Karzai will visit The Hague prior to the winter holidays, and can engage Dutch politicians, the press, and the public.

¶16. (C) MFA Director for Security Affairs Robert de Groot was more categorical when he spoke to Polcouns in a separate conversation on November 7. Following the news that Norway would not team with the Dutch in Uruzgan, de Groot described the GONL as "very worried," and acknowledged that the parliamentary debate could slip until January. He described the French contribution as significant, but additional contributions from Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and possibly Georgia will require additional training, equipment, and financial support from the Dutch. As a result, the Dutch effort in Uruzgan may cost more with these partners than if the Dutch decided to stay in Uruzgan alone, or with just France. De Groot feared the Labor Party may try to make the argument that the added costs of the additional contributions make them more trouble than they are worth, thereby strengthening the argument in favor of reducing the extension to the point in which it was "no longer serious."

¶17. (C) De Gooijer said he was "positive about the developments" in Uruzgan. The Dutch are working well with the locals, finding weapons, and peeling off non-core Taliban fighters from the fight. Although the stories do not always reach the press, there has been a "substantial improvement" in the past year. At the same time, there have been setbacks. De Gooijer added that "intensifying reconstruction" and getting people "out of camps" was vital.

¶18. (C) In terms of the future, de Gooijer reviewed his proposal from the November 2 RC-South political directors' meeting in London: NATO/ISAF should claim victory in 2010, and if NATO is still involved in Afghanistan, there should be a new training-focused mission. De Gooijer quoted his British counterpart as saying that if NATO is still fighting in Afghanistan in 2010, "we have done something wrong." De Gooijer suggested a new training-oriented approach is possible by 2010, based on the progress he has seen in the past 14 months. But key Dutch cabinet members "will not buy ISAF under a new name."

Labor Party Parliamentary Faction Shows Its Cards

¶19. (SBU) The Dutch newspaper Volkskrant reported front page on November 8 that a majority of the Labor parliamentary faction is prepared to support an 18-month extension in Uruzgan. Such an extension would be final, with no potential to extend further -- a "one-off." A minority felt a six-month extension was more appropriate, while an even smaller group pushed for an immediate withdrawal. According to the article, several Labor parliamentarians stressed that the faction's position was not yet final, primarily because it had yet to receive information from the GONL on such issues as who will succeed the Dutch in Uruzgan. However, the article notes the general feeling within the faction that the Dutch mission should be phased out in a "responsible manner."

¶20. (C) De Groot told Polcouns November 8 that the Labor Party's public announcement regarding the length of the extension puts the MFA bureaucracy in a tight spot. De Groot said he took a phone call from Development Minister (and Labor Party member) Koenders directing him to write talking points for the November 9 Cabinet meeting stressing that any extension should not last any longer than 18 months. Not more than five minutes later, de Groot said FM (and Christian Democrat) Verhagen called and directed him to write points proposing an "open ended" extension of no less than 30 months duration. Working for both ministers, de Groot lamented his unenviable position, and suggested the November 9 Cabinet meeting will be contentious and unlikely to produce a clear

result.

COMMENT

¶21. (C) The extension question roller coaster ride continues with a dive following the NATO defense ministerial high and Norway taking a pass on Uruzgan duty. Dutch contacts are questioning more and more the point of including so many different contributors, speculating that command and control issues and financial costs for supporting these disparate contributions will be more trouble than they are worth, i.e., be careful what you ask for! The good news is that the debate has shifted from "will we extend?" to "how long?" At a minimum, an 18-month extension is better than a withdrawal, and puts the Dutch firmly in Uruzgan through January 2010 -- coincidentally, the same time period that de Gooijer referred to as a "make or break" period for NATO to declare victory and look at possibly re-branding the NATO role as primarily a training mission.

¶22. (C) Our best guess at this point is that the GONL will leave the extension time period initially vague to allow Balkenende and the Labor Party to trade political deals on the extension and the dismissal law. Getting the Dutch to commit to Uruzgan until 2010 -- perhaps with the promise that they will look at additional duty elsewhere in Afghanistan -- may be the best possible outcome at this point. Amb. Arnall meets with PM Balkenende on November 14, and will take this up further.
Arnall